DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 482 CG 027 322

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TITLE Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise: Implications for Career Counseling.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Choice; *Career Counseling; Career Guidance; Counseling; Counseling Psychology; *Counseling Techniques; *Counseling Theories; Decision Making; *Evaluation Criteria; Vocational Interests
IDENTIFIERS Compromise; *Gottfredson (L S)

ABSTRACT

An overview of L. S. Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise (1981) is presented in this paper. Circumscription and compromise deal with the processes by which occupational aspirations are developed and sacrificed. Research has shown that targeting career awareness at an early age is important. The theory suggests that individuals will only consider occupations within an area bounded by their acceptable levels of prestige and sex type. Few studies have explored Gottfredson's theory, although empirical support for the model has been offered as evidence. Many of the studies involve a small sample size and few have dealt with the multicultural implications for this theory. Research indicates that the theory may be more complex than originally proposed but it does seem that the compromise component is fundamental to understanding career decision making. Some implications for counseling include incorporating atypical role models for elementary school students, proactive shaping of choices for secondary school students, and an emphasis on prestige and sex-type considerations for all students and clients. Even so, a variety of hypotheses need to be tested based upon the theory so as to examine how circumscription and compromise are related to making sound career decisions. Contains 13 references. (RJM)

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Running Head: GOTTFREDSON'S THEORY

Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise: Implications for Career Counseling

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of L. S. Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise along with a selected review of relevant literature and career counseling implications. Circumscription and compromise deals with the processes by which occupational aspirations are developed and sacrificed. Research has shown that targeting career awareness at an early age is important. Implications for counseling include incorporating atypical role models for elementary school students, proactive shaping of choices for secondary school students, and an emphasis on prestige and sex-type considerations for all students and clients.

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Gottfredson's Theory of Circumscription and Compromise:

Implications for Career Counseling

The world of work and career development has changed greatly since Frank Parsons started the Vocational Bureau in 1908 in Boston. More than ever, people need help coping with finding employment and career change. Counselors are in a unique position to help as they serve a wide range of clients in a variety of settings (e.g., schools, agencies, private practice). Many counselors base their career development perspective on a consideration of the roles of the individual (e.g., job, family, and leisure), as well as the dynamics of career choice. To provide a knowledgeable service to clients, counselors need to be aware of current trends and new advancements related to career development.

L. S. Gottfredson published in 1981 the article, "Circumscription and Compromise: A Developmental Theory of Occupational Aspirations." The theory dealt with the process by which occupational aspirations develop during the preschool through the college years, and the process by which occupational aspirations are sacrificed when they cannot be implemented. This paper will present the main constructs of Gottfredson's model; a selected review of relevant literature, and career counseling implications are included.

Circumscription and Compromise

Gottfredson used the term *circumscription* in her developmental theory of occupational aspirations to describe career exploration as a process of eliminating and retaining occupational choices. The theory suggested that individuals will only consider occupations within an area bounded by their acceptable levels of prestige and sex type which was called the *zone of acceptable alternatives*.

Circumscription was related to the developmental scheme within the theory through four stages. The first stage (i.e., ages 3-5) is characterized by an orientation to size and power, where occupations are perceived as adult roles. The second stage (i.e., ages 6-8) is characterized by an orientation to sex roles, with occupations that are not consistent with one's sex-role preference being eliminated. The third stage (i.e., ages 9-13) is characterized by an orientation to social valuation, where an awareness of social class results in the elimination of occupations that are lower than one's tolerable-level prestige boundary or higher than one's tolerable-effort prestige boundary. The fourth stage (i.e., ages 14 and beyond) is characterized by an orientation to the internal unique self, eliminates occupations that are not compatible with one's interests and abilities. Therefore, circumscription suggests that individuals become less flexible and the zone of acceptable alternatives becomes smaller as occupations are eliminated over time.

Gottfredson also proposed the concept of *compromise* which deals with the implementation, rather than the development, of aspirations in career choice. When compromise is needed the field of interest is sacrificed first, followed by the prestige preference, and sex-type which is the earliest to develop is the least likely to be compromised. Within the concept of compromise there was introduced a cognitive map of occupations which was a dual axis representation of the major dimensions of occupational perceptions with prestige shown on the vertical axis, and the sex-type of jobs shown on the horizontal axis. Occupations were denoted by the first letter of its Holland code.

Selected Review of the Literature

Few studies have explored Gottfredson's theory; however, empirical support for the model has been offered as evidence with circumscription and compromise each tested in its own right. A number of research studies examining the circumscription and compromise components have resulted in mixed findings. Holt (1989) lent some support for compromise, but suggested that the model may be an oversimplification of the process. Taylor and Pryor (1985) supported the relative influence of the three variables (i.e., interest, prestige, sex-type), however, they concluded that the influence may be more complex than Gottfredson had suggested.

Hesketh, Durant, and Pryor (1990), in their study that rated 27 hypothetical jobs that combined sex-type, prestige, and interests, found no support for the compromise component of Gottfredson's model. Research done with Asian-Americans (Leung, 1993) found that the range and area of the zone of acceptable alternatives generally became bigger in the adolescent years instead of becoming smaller as predicted by Gottfredson. Leung also found that Asian Americans were more likely to compromise sex-type for prestige.

In support of Gottfredson's theory were Henderson, Hesketh, and Tuffin (1988) whose results indicated that sex-typed preferences would influence occupational preferences from an earlier age than suggested by Gottfredson, with males demonstrating more rigid sex typing than females. Lapan & Jingeleski (1992) supported the importance of sex-type and prestige in a study with eighth graders, and replicated the Gottfredson cognitive map of vocational aspirations. Although the study by Hesketh, Durant, and Pryor (1990) did not support the compromise component, they found that the circumscription component remained viable as

the respondents'-occupations eliminated at an early age ceased to draw attention and knowledge in later years.

Hesketh, Pryor, and Gleitzman (1989) investigated the application of the fuzzy-set theory to the measurement of dimensions relevant to the circumscription and compromise theory. (A fuzzy-set is the notion of latitudes of acceptance and rejection in attitude measurement along a continuum from total membership to non-membership.) The study found that the zone of acceptable alternatives based on the cognitive map can be measured as a fuzzy-set, resulting in a range of occupational alternatives in an individual's social space rather than a single choice.

One of the assumptions that may be drawn from the literature would suggest that Gottfredson's theory is more complex than originally proposed; however, research seems to indicate that the theory does provide a useful framework. Research has shown that the compromise component is fundamental to understanding career decision making.

Career Counseling Implications

The implications for career counseling would point to the importance of targeting career awareness at an early age. Research has shown that occupations eliminated at an early age cease to draw attention which means less knowledge accumulates, hence those occupations are no longer considered. Also, in all four stages (i.e., age periods), males are less likely than females to cross over gender boundaries (Holt, 1989; Leung & Harmon, 1990; Henderson, Hesketh, & Tuffin, 1988)), therefore, sex-type is an important factor in the career exploration process.

Career education in the elementary schools should incorporate the use of atypical role models (Miller, 1986): Kindergarten through third grade should be role models atypical to sex-type; and grades 4-6 should be role models atypical to social class (i.e., prestige). Interventions at the secondary school level should promote proactive shaping of choices by challenging students' negative attitudes about careers for which they have the abilities to be successful. Counselors need to emphasize prestige and sex-type considerations as important aspects in helping persons with career concerns.

Counselors dealing with clients when jobs are limited (e.g., times of high unemployment) should be aware that compromises need to be made, because totally acceptable and accessible occupations are not always found. Once a client has sacrificed his/her interest and prestige, the only further compromise available is sex-role stereotype. It is during these times that individuals may, under the stress of compromise, actually consider the widest range of career alternatives (Pryor, 1985a, 1985b).

Summary

The research completed on Gottfredson's theory has been from Australia (Pryor, 1985a, 1985b; Taylor & Pryor, 1985), New Zealand (Henderson, Hesketh, & Tuffin, 1988), and the United States (Hesketh, Pryor, & Gleitzman, 1989; Holt, 1989; Lapan & Jingeleski, 1992; Leung, 1993; Leung & Harmon, 1990). Many of the studies involve a small sample size and few have dealt with the multicultural implications for this theory. The exception being the study by Leung (1993) with Asian Americans which did point out two striking differences: consideration of occupations with the widest range of prestige and sex-type became stabilized around age 18, and that Asian Americans are more likely to compromise sex-type for prestige.

A variety of hypotheses need to be tested based upon Gottfredson's theory to examine how circumscription and compromise are related to making sound career decisions. Specific studies with multicultural groups, larger sample populations, and assessing the effectiveness of school career education programs could contribute to the further development of the compromise and circumscription theory.

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